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WOMEN IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.

EDNA ETHEL DAWLEY,

CLASS "1901".

WOMEN IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.

The French Revolution was one of the greatest movements the world has ever known. It not only completely changed the state of affairs in France, both socially and politically, but exerted a powerful influence throughout Europe; and, indeed, the whole civilized world. This period is one of intense interest; it has, perhaps, received more consideration, and still excites more inquiry than any other period of history.

At the outset, before the awful atrocities of the infuriated mob in Paris began to be felt, foreign powers sympathized more or less with the cause of the French people. The laboring classes had long been trodden underfoot by the French nobles. We can have but a faint idea of the miserable bondage in which the poor peasants were held. Continual wars had drained the country and plunged it heavily into debt. Despotic rulers had wasted their lives in luxury and debsuchery. Much of the land was owned by the nobles who held complete sway over the peasants and treated them worse than slaves. The clergy had become rich and indifferent but still demanded tithes and fees. For nearly two hundred years the common people had had no voice in the government, and so were helpless against tyranny and taxation. Unbelief had also been slowly creeping into the country adding to the hopelessness of the poor and the independence of the noble.

It seems almost impossible that such a state of affairs could have existed in France little more than a century ago, or since our own Revolution. The gaining of our independence and the establishment of such a just and liberal government here in America greatly influenced the French people. The literature of that time, also, had an immense effect in hastening the coming of the Revolution.

During Louis Fourteenth's long reign of over seventy years, French monarchy reached the height of its power. Louis was supreme both at home and abroad and was exalted and obeyed almost as a god. He it was who built the magnificent Palace of Versailles, which cost millions of money, and twenty years of continual labor. Nothing could compare with the grandeur of this structure which was filled with statuary, paintings, mirrors and tapestry; and surrounded by immense parks in which there were innumerable artificial lakes, streams, fountains and cascades. Four thousand servants waited on the King, five thousand horses were at his service, and ten thousand men formed his bodyguard. All this splendor was kept up while the peasants of France were dying of starvation, eating vile weeds and grass, and forever "grubbing in the earth" in order to pay the ever increasing taxes. And, it was not taxes alone which made the lot of the serfs and peasants unendurable. Often seigneurs and dignitaries committ-

ed terrible outrages, compelled their tenants to work for them without pay, and destroyed their crops in hunting. Yet not all the nobles were cruel, and many advocated reform and equal rights.

Throughout the reign of Louis XV affairs grew worse and he had good reason to believe that a deluge was to follow him. He excited hatred among all classes by suppressing Parliaments and allowing arbitrary imprisonments. Thousands of the most influential and worthy citizens of France were secretly thrown into prison, without so much as the form of a trial, and often without knowing their offense.

When Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette became King and Queen of France their first act was to fall upon their knees, exclaiming: "O God, guide us, protect us; we are too young to reign". Throughout their lives they were devoted to the people and various reforms were attempted. Louis showed his love of liberty in the assistance he gave us in our time of need, and Americans have good cause to honor his name. But, in the beginning the King and Queen made several grave mistakes and lost the confidence of the people. The first great change of Louis' reign was the summoning of the States-General which had not met for one hundred and seventy-five years. This resolved itself into the National Assembly in which the representatives of the people stood equal to the clergy and nobles. However, both bishop and

lord refused to share the burden of taxation; and Louis fearing that a crisis was approaching, collected a body of Swiss troops. This alarmed the citizens of Paris, who formed a militia to defend their representatives in the Assembly. This militia received the name of the National Guard and was placed under the command of La Fayette, who had distinguished himself in America.

The first real act of the Revolution was the taking of the Bastille, in 1789. That showed the people their power and encouraged open action. Soon after this, Paris was enraged to hear that the King had given his soldiers a splendid banquet at Versailles while they were dying of starvation. A great rabble, headed by thousands of miserable women marched to Versailles, overpowered the Swiss guards, and surged through the palace. They threatened the Queen, and doubtless would have taken her life had it not been for the efforts of La Fayette. The royal family was compelled to go to Paris with the rejoicing mob, and from that time was in the power of the populace. In the spring of 1791 an escape was attempted which resulted in capture just when success seemed nearest. From that time the King and his family were guarded as prisoners. Again a howling mob forced its way within their palace and demanded that the King sign certain decrees. The Queen, pale and trembling, stood behind a barricade

of tables, with her little son in her arms, and confronted not only the threats of the mob but the anguish of her own heart.

As the National Assembly had accomplished so little, all faith in it began to be lost. Danton, Marat, and Robespierre, leaders of the republican party, ordered that the King be at once deposed. The assembly delayed action, and the citizens rising in insurrection, attacked the Tuilleries, where they plundered and murdered. The King and his household fled to the Assembly for protection, and the brave Swiss guards, left without orders, fell victims to the bloodthirsty insurgents. August 10, 1792, the Assembly passed a decree suspending the King from office and depriving La Fayette of the command of the National Guards. The King and his family were sent to the Temple in which gloomy stronghold their sorrows multiplied day by day. A few months later King Louis left this prison to "give his life in expiation of the sins of others, rather than his own." And now began that Reign of Terror in which thousands of innocent men and women were offered up as a sacrifice to "La Guillotine".

Throughout the eighteenth Century women were conspicuous. In all the combats they had their place; in all the clamour of party and all the solitude of captivity their voices are heard; and bravely did they act their parts. During the ages of oppression and misgovernment they had been the greater sufferers,

and now, when they saw that change was possible, they were ready not only to follow but to lead. The types of women of those times, however, were as varied as shadows of night and day. From the vile creature of the streets and dens of Paris, who seemed almost heartless and fearless, to the charming, light-hearted, young Queen, Marie Antoinette, is a long distance and one cannot hope to touch upon all the intervening classes. Hundreds of women deserve to be mentioned but it is possible to treat only of a few. Those who best illustrate the types of the French Revolution are: the woman of the mob, Charlotte Corday, another Jeanne d'Arc; Madame Roland, and Madame de Staël, most famous of all citizens; the Princess de Lamballe, a true example of nobility; and Marie Antoinette the representative of royalty.

Dr. Weir Mitchel gives us a good illustration of the lowest type of woman, during these times, in his story entitled "Adventures of François". Quatze Pattes, or the Crab, as she was called, was more monster than human being; a treacherous, hideous old hag, who lived by theft and crime, yet so subtle and crafty that she was feared and obeyed. Such as she it was who reveled in excesses, encouraged bloodshed, and prolonged the state of anarchy. Other women, aroused by the fierce Jacobin speeches, suffering from the worst sins, or dying of starvation, joined the ranks of the mob not knowing or caring what the results

might be so long as they fed the vengeance burning in their hearts. It was these women who raised the insurrection against Versailles, who upheld the deeds of Marat and Robespierre, and who scoffed and jeered as Marie Antoinette passed to her death.

In order to thoroughly to understand the reason for the act through which Charlotte Corday's name has become historical, we must know the progress which the Revolution had made. There had been three powerful parties: the Royalists, who long before had been entirely suppressed; the Girondists, or moderates, who had for a time held the country in check only the more violently to be overcome at last by the Jacobins, or extreme radicals, who had raised up such leaders as Danton, Marat, and Robespierre who held their places by sending all those to the scaffold whom they conceived to be against them. It was with their ascendancy that the Reign of Terror, which lasted over a year, began, June 2, 1793. The prisons were crowded full of victims, taken under any pretense: who, after a kind of mock trial, were hurried off in the rattling carts to meet their fate before the eyes of people drunken with blood. Was it any wonder that Charlotte Corday, a young girl of blameless life and remarkable courage, conceived the idea that if the monster maniac Marat, who was daily calling for "blood, more blood," were himself killed, France would be free from such outrage. She knew the perils of

her project, for many of the people still believed him their savior and friend. However, she determined to carry out her plan without assistance and with the one hope of benefiting her country. Charlotte had always been interested in political matters and her early studies had made her a Republican. She was greatly in favor of the Girondists and knew that the triumph of Marat meant death to them. Leaving home quietly she made her way to Paris and after two or three attempts obtained admittance to Marat's private chamber, where he was confined because of illness. There, even as he was threatening some of her friends, she stabbed him to the heart. After her deed Charlotte was perfectly calm in the midst of turmoil thinking that she had restored peace to France. In court she answered with promptness, clearness and truthfulness. "All marveled at the beauty of her countenance and the music of her voice." "She had killed Marat for his crimes--the miseries that he had caused. The thought was hers alone; her hatred was enough. She had killed one man to save a thousand; villain to save innocents; a wild beast to give her country peace."

We admire the faith and courage with which Charlotte Corday did what she thought to be her duty although it cost her her life; but the act was an error, for Marat's power had already begun to diminish and such a death tended only to lift him to martyrdom. Charlotte herself met death so nobly that her enemies trembled,

and several who admired and loved her were afterwards proud to share the fate which she suffered so heroically.

But, strongest and greatest of all heroines of the French Revolution is Madame Roland, daughter of a humble artist, and wife of Roland the writer and politician. It is to her that we turn for a type of the earlier and finer characteristics of that movement which stood for liberty, equality, fraternity. She was the very life and soul of the Gironde; the genius and inspirer of the men who overthrew the throne and founded the Republic.

Manon, as she was familiarly called, read easily at the age of four and from that time on consumed everything that came her way. She read the dryest books on politics and law, and became a disciple of Plutarch when only nine years of age. Manon's mother was very wise and gentle and her father made much of his only living child who was so remarkable for her years. At eleven she entered a convent where she formed friendships which lasted through life. After a year spent in the convent and another with her grandmother, she returned home a charming young lady, for her education made her appear older than she really was. She then busied herself with helping her mother, playing her violin or guitar, writing, reading, studying and visiting. She found her "fitting food" in the politics of the day and Rousseau became her favorite author. She had many admirers who "passed

in review without success", until she at length married Monsieur Roland, whose tastes she thought to be like her own. He was nearly twenty years older than herself and fell far short of her ideal, but she proved a faithful, devoted wife and he grew to esteem her more and more. In 1791 Roland was a commissioner to the National Assembly and the next year became Minister of the Interior. In all his work he was greatly influenced, and nobly aided by his wife; and, as he grew more infirm, he depended on her for everything. When Louis XVI refused to sanction the decree for the banishment of priests, Madame Roland addressed to him a remonstrance which caused her husband to be dismissed. When the King was sent to the Temple Roland was recalled to his office. Loudly and ineffectually both he and his wife protested against the savage September massacres in the prisons. This aroused against them the enmity of the great leaders Danton and Robespierre. Roland was arrested but managed to escape. Madame Roland was thrown into prison, where, during her five months' confinement she wrote her famous Private Memoirs. "These" she said "will be my confessions, for I shall conceal nothing." Composed with all her fluency and cultivation, they give us her entire life and the expression of her inmost soul. We can see her in her cell, which is brightened by flowers and books brought

h^o by her friends, and which the kind jailor permits her to retain, writing in great haste while bitter tears of sorrow fall upon her paper as she thinks of her happy childhood, her husband or daughter, or her friends. These manuscripts, which were taken as written and hidden by her friend Bosc under a stone in the forest, are still preserved. They were first printed by this friend in 1795, when the terrors of the Revolution had subsided.

After her marriage Madame Roland had come in contact with many prominent men who were drawn to her home to talk politics and listen to her eloquence. She became beautiful when animated by conversation and carried everything before her by her fluency, enthusiasm, and the charm of her voice. She was kind and indulgent towards those who deserved pity, strong, brave, wise and noble in all her acts. She had changing moods but was always full of spirit, activity and ambition. Was it surprising that this woman became such a power, that her letters were printed everywhere, and that she was adored by all who knew her best and feared by those who opposed her? The uncertainty and rashness of the times forced her into hard, unreasoning hatreds, but also showed her her truest friends. There were many men who would have given up their lives to save her and for one of these she felt a strong, overpowering love; but this was hidden in her heart while she sacrificed herself entirely to her husband; and

Not until recent years, when some of her letters to him were brought to light, was it discovered that this man was the ill-fated Buzot.

Up to the last moment Madame Roland bore her sufferings with dignity and resignation. Those who were most opposed to her political views are highest in praise of her courage and virtue. After writing a pathetic farewell to all she held most dear, this noble-hearted woman was led from the Conciergerie to her doom on the morning of November 8th, 1793. At the last moment, as she stood prepared to die and her eyes fell upon the statue of liberty near the scaffold, she uttered those words since so famous, "O, liberty, how many crimes are committed in thy name." At the news of her death her husband, stunned and shattered, left his place of refuge, and going out into the fields, passed the blade of his sword-cane through his heart, dying so peacefully that he seemed when found as if asleep. Buzot lost his senses, and tracked from place to place, wandered from his pursuers, and his body was found at last in a cornfield half-eaten by wolves.

It is fitting here to mention Madame de Staël, who in so many ways compares with Madame Roland. She too, had a great influence in political affairs. Her parents, Monsieur and Madame Necker, were at one time the leading citizens of Paris, and their

daughter, brought up in one of the most famous Salons of the city, early became popular. She was a brilliant society leader, a convincing speaker, and an eloquent writer. Through her study of Rousseau she became an advocate of liberty but she did not carry her principles so far as Madame Roland. She was "too republican for the aristocrats, and too aristocratic for the republicans." Madame de Staël escaped the ravages of the Revolution and is considered one of the most talented novelists France has ever known.

Let us now turn to a pleasing character among the nobility, the Princess de Lamballe. In 1769 this Princess of Savoy was chosen by Louis XV as a wife for the son of the Duke of Penthièvre, the Prince of Lamballe. While her gay young husband lived the Princess showed great wifely forbearance and was very forgiving; upon his death about a year after his marriage the young widow of eighteen returned to her father-in-law's mansion, Rambouillet, near Versailles. She had already become subject to fits of melancholy which made her life pathetic, but there she grew better, and was very happy. The old Duke, cheerful, kindly and benevolent, was called "King of the Poor", and his charities and goodness preserved him through the Reign of Terror, only to die at last crushed by the death of this beautiful, young daughter-in-law.

Almost from the time when Marie Antoinette married ^{the} Dauphin,

the Princess was her dearest friend and later became Superintendent of the Queen's Household. After a time this friendship paled a little before the influence of the Countess de Polignac, but when trouble came the Queen turned again gladly to this friend who had retired without a murmur and returned without complaint. Sorrow knit them closely together and their friendship was broken only by death.

In character the Princess was a model of virtue; true, earnest, and devoted, incapable of an evil thought. She was bright but not witty, and disliked argument or dispute. She sought only to be useful and was so brave that she sacrificed her life in order to serve those she loved. At the opening of the States General Madame de Lamballe had assisted. When the royal family had been compelled to leave Versailles and take up their abode in the Tuilleries she joined them there. In 1791 she left the Palace with them on the night when they made their escape. They were captured but she succeeded in reaching England, where she remained for some time and it is supposed that she tried to obtain the protection of the English government for the royal family.

Marie Antoinette begged her to remain there in safety, but she said: "The Queen needs me and I must live or die at her side." She returned to France, after making her will at Aix-

la-Chapelle, and throughout the hardships which followed, aided and supported her friends in every possible way, showing true worth and courage. She was with the royal family through the attack upon the palace in June 1792. She was with them when they sought refuge in the Assembly and when they were conducted to the Temple. But at last she was torn from them and confined in "La Force" where she was killed among the first in that terrible September of 1792. Her head elevated upon a pike was carried through the streets and displayed before the windows of the room where Marie Antoinette was confined. From knowledge of the affair the Queen fainted and was thus spared the ghastly sight. The Princess de Lamballe is not remembered because of great deeds of valor, eloquence or influence, but because of her devotion to a friend and genuine worth as a woman.

History has often been severe in its treatment of Marie Antoinette, and there have always been conflicting opinions as to her character. But, as the years with their changes have rolled by, the faults and follies of the unfortunate Queen have been forgotten and she stands crowned anew receiving the love and admiration of all the world. The details of her life fill the brightest and darkest pages of French history, and the sorrows of her last years ought to silence to voice of calumny.

Marie Antoinette was ^{not} the youngest and fairest among the

sixteen children of Francis First of Germany and his famous wife, Maria-Theresa, who became Queen of Austria. From her earliest years this daughter was intended for the French throne as a link between Austria and France. Her father died when she was six years of age and her mother, engrossed in state affairs, found little time to superintend Maria's education which was sadly neglected. This led to her willfulness and frivolity.

To show how unpractical her education was, brought up as she had been in a luxurious court, this little anecdote is often related: Some one remarked in her presence one day, shortly after she arrived in France, that "the poor people could not obtain bread." "Then why don't they eat cake?" she replied lightly.

When only fifteen Marie Antoinette had been separated from all she held most dear, and with great formality, had been received into France never again to return to her native land. Amid great rejoicing her marriage took place at Versailles, May 16, 1770. An ominous storm followed the ceremony, during which a fire broke out and over a hundred people were trampled to death. Thus, at the outset disaster marked the happiness of the union. The young husband and wife were deeply moved and gave their year's income in a relief fund.

Life at Versailles at this time was not favorable or agreeable to a blithesome young girl placed there without friends or

direct counsel, and surrounded by all the evils of a court. She was besieged by conflicting advice and claims and knew not which way to turn in order to please. Her husband's great fault was his indecision, so she obtained no real aid from him, although he felt for her and tried to make her happy.

Marie Antoinette was beautiful, winsome, kind-hearted, and ingenuous, full of wit, and with a keen sense of honor and justice; but she lacked that knowledge of duty, and power to perform it which alone could have made her most useful to her adopted country. It is doubtful if, at this time, any power could have controlled the forces which were hastening on the Revolution, and it is unlikely that any other woman could better have filled the place which she was destined to occupy. She won her husband's love, kept in favor with the perverse old King, and gained many true and worthy friends.

When the young King and Queen began to reign there was universal joy. The year before, when the Dauphin and his wife made their first visit to Paris, Marie Antoinette had been told, as she looked at the mass of people surging around her, that there before her eyes were two hundred thousand lovers. Less than twenty years from that time just as large a number condemned her to death. For a while the prospect seemed fair, although clouds were rising, and the Queen entered into a bril-

glamorous court life with vigor and enjoyment. The King always
pensive cared less for pleasures and liked best to spend his
time in a little shop where he worked at lock-making. In 1774
he presented his wife with the beautiful little villa called
"La Trianon", and there she took the most delight in living.
Dressed in simple country gowns with straw hat and apron, she
played dairy-maid, cared for her flowers and pets, and entertain-
ed her most intimate friends.

The Queens gayety and quickness to see the ludicrous side
of everything caused a suspicion that she ridiculed the people.
She often disregarded etiquette appeared coquettish and indis-
creet; but this was more from thoughtlessness and a desire to
please than from direct intention. Much injury was done her
through jealousy and suspicion, and soon she found herself hated
and misjudged. It was thought that she influenced public affairs
too greatly and every calamity was laid to her. Her intimacy
with foreigners was disliked and she was unpopular because of
her relation to Austria. At last she was held responsible for
the most absurd things; such as the failure of crops, suffering
of the people, and the appointment of bad ministers.

Marie Antoinette was not ideal but she was heroic and the
Revolution brought out all ^{throughout} her noble qualities. The sufferings
which she endured during her imprisonment are only too well

known. First came the separation from her friends, and then, the terrible shock at the death of Madame de Lamballe. Soon followed the heartrending farewell to her husband, and the brave effort she was forced to make to comfort her children and Madame Elizabeth, the King's sister, who shared the sorrows. But the hardest blow of all fell when her little son was snatched from her desperate arms and given into the hands of brutes. It has never been definitely known whether the child died or was sent to America. From that hour Marie Antoinette fell into hopeless despondency. Her daughter, who escaped and was sent to Austria has given the world all the details of this painful existence. Little more than a year's imprisonment so changed the Queen's appearance that she would scarcely have been recognized. Her face was thin, pale, and impassive; her hair, white as snow; and her clothes, worn and coarse. Yet she carried herself with grace and dignity and one would have known she was born a queen.

Her trial was inhuman. Once, when she nearly fainted, an officer gave her a glass of water a kindness for which he was immediately arrested. On the night before her death she wrote a letter to Madame Elizabeth which is now to be found among the State papers. In it she forbids her children, if spared, to ever seek revenge. Impatiently she waited for the moment which should reunite her to her husband and best friends; and when

that moment came, she bore herself with saintly fortitude.

The nobles of the Old Régime, if they could not always live worthily, could at least die grandly. One is continually impressed, in reading the history of this period, by the calm courage with which these tenderly bred men and women faced an ignominious death at the hands of brutal factionists. But their blood seems at first sight to have flowed in vain, for France was to lie prostrate many a year at the feet of a military Dictator, whom kings were again to follow; and not until our own day, almost a hundred years later, was the motto of that first republic—liberty, equality, fraternity—to be realized in a government by the people.